

The Evolution of Occupational Therapy: Life History of Dr. Shirley A. Wells, DrPH, OTR, FAOTA

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Introduction

- **Purpose:** This life history is one of 29 life history interviews which are a part of a larger project, Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT). The purpose of the project is to gather information about the history and evolution of OT practice through life histories of individuals who have been influential in developing OT. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information. This study intends to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how OT practice has evolved from its inception to current practice.
- The Kawa model was used to guide this research study in the development of interview questions and data analysis.

Description of Participant



Shirley Wells is an accomplished occupational therapist who has had many achievements throughout her life in the field of OT. She started her career in the area of pediatrics and continued to work as a practicing occupational therapist in conjunction as working as a professor. She previously worked as a professor at Texas Tech and the University of Texas – Pan American. Currently, she is the Chair, Associate Professor, Discipline Coordinator and Lecturer at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She also has served as a member, consultant/advisor on national and local associations. In addition to these leadership positions, she has also served as a board member, chairperson and representative on the international, national and local associations. Increasing the body of knowledge about diversity and community-based practice in OT, is something that Dr. Wells has dedicated her life to and is reflected in her involvement in these leadership positions. It is also reflected in her research, books, book chapters, research articles, as a panel member, and lectures/poster sessions she has held throughout her career.

Literature Review

When Dr. Wells entered the field of occupational therapy in the late 1970s, the Representative Assembly (RA) of AOTA passed a resolution to promote state licensure for OTs, resulting in the recognition of OT services by private payers, improved recognition in public programs and a legal definition of occupational therapy (Reed & Peters, 2008). Legislation in the 1970s and 1980s also started to include occupational therapy as a primary qualifying service, when it was previously considered to be as a secondary service, only to be reimbursable in conjunction with physical therapy or speech-language pathology services (Reed & Peters, 2008). During this time, there was also limited funds for research, therefore a lack of research, to support occupational therapy interventions, a trend that still occurs today (Reed & Peters, 2008).

Methodology

- This was a qualitative study done using a life history approach.
- Participants were assigned from a list developed by the course instructors through purposive sampling.
- IRB approval was obtained through the University of North Dakota's Institutional Review Board.
- There were no gatekeeper issues as initial contact was made by course instructors
- Informed consent was obtained before the interview began.
- The semi-structured interview was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the course instructors; the questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all the individuals interviewed as part of the larger project.
- The interview was conducted via the telecommunication app, Zoom. The interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. The interview was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

- The transcription was coded and the 24 codes were grouped into 4 categories, corresponding themes were developed, and one final assertion was created to summarize the overall meaning.
- Triangulation involved the use in member checking to clarify and confirm the information that was in the transcript was accurate and correct.
- Through the data analysis process, the researchers established trustworthiness by keeping reflexive journals to address biases and thoughts about the process. There were also two researchers reviewing the data along with advisor review of the data analysis. The researchers also cross-referenced the resume provided by the participant to verify the information from the interview.

Findings and Discussion

- **Overcoming Challenges**
 - Dr. Wells emphasized the importance of diversity in OT and how important the consideration of diversity is for the advancement of the profession.
 - Dr. Wells reflected that losing friends is part of making progress.
 - Dr. Wells asserted that someone treating you differently because of race is his or her problem, not your
- **Seat at the Table**
 - Dr. Wells stated research is integral for the survival of the profession
 - To ensure the role of OT and to keep our seat at the table, Dr. Wells emphasized the need to move to OTD.
 - Because OT does not have enough research to support and advance the profession, we need to advance to the doctoral level
- **Practice**
 - Dr. Wells stated that community-based practice will help distinguish OT from other disciplines who claim to do the same things that OT does.
 - Dr. Wells believes that the only way to change a community is through community-based practice, not through one-on-one interaction.
 - OT practice has provided many opportunities and rewards through leadership, community, travel, and gaining new perspectives.

Conclusions

- **Final Assertion:** Dr. Wells has a passion for the integration of diversity, community-based practice and the necessity for OTD to facilitate and propel occupational therapy to the next level, increasing the potential for research, and to ensure the survival of the profession for generations to come.
- **Conclusion:** The interview with Dr. Shirley Wells provided a deep insight and understanding of her life throughout her OT career. The researchers were able to get a better understanding of her and the barriers she faced that led to her accomplishments and contributions to the profession of OT. Dr. Wells has a passion for diversity and how integral the consideration for diversity will be for the advancement of the profession. She also emphasized the importance of research for the survival of occupational therapy and for the continued inclusion of occupational therapists in the decision-making process. Dr. Wells also believes that community-based practice is the way to distinguish occupational therapy from other professions and is the only way to change a population is through community interventions.
- "Community based practice have always been a focus of mine and have been, and I have been talking about inter-community based practice and how the profession needs to move into that arena for 20 years now. It's actually where we started and over time we kind of feel that we kind of lost our way from that, because of the changes in society we need to go back. That's the first thing I think if we go back to that basic community kind of approach that will distinguish OT from these PT's and other so-called disciplines that are trying to say they do the same thing that we do." - Dr. Shirley Wells, Ph.D., MPH, OTR/L, FAOTA

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